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Ring Around the Rosie: Metafolklore, Rhyme and Reason

July 24, 2014 by [Stephen Winick](#)

A recent blog post at [Londonist](#) describes "Five London Nursery Rhymes Depicting Death and Ruin." The rhymes in question have diverse origins and histories, but what seems incontrovertible from James FitzGerald's work is that they describe dark and portentous matters from English history.

Or do they? Looking closely at these rhymes, and at scholarship surrounding them, suggests other interpretations. I'll discuss one of the rhymes in particular, because it tells us interesting things about folklore and our ideas about folklore: "Ring Around the Rosie," or "Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses," as it's sometimes known.

FitzGerald's text goes like this:

“ Ring-a-ring-a-roses,
A pocket full of posies,
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all fall down.



Kate Greenaway's *Mother Goose or the Old Nursery Rhymes* (1881) was the first publication of "Ring Around the Rosie" in English. Her illustration was published in 1881 and is therefore in the public domain.

"Ring Around the Rosie," or "Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses," as it's sometimes known.

FitzGerald states emphatically that this rhyme arose from the Great Plague, an outbreak of pneumonic plague that affected London in the year 1665:

“*Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses is all about the Great Plague; the apparent whimsy being a foil for one of London’s most atavistic dreads (thanks to the Black Death). The fatalism of the rhyme is brutal: the roses are a euphemism for deadly rashes, the posies a supposed preventative measure; the a-tishoos pertain to sneezing symptoms, and the implication of everyone falling down is, well, death.*”

This interpretation emerged in the mid-twentieth century, and has become widespread, but it has never been accepted by folklorists, for several reasons. First, like most folklore items, this rhyme exists in many versions and variants. This allows us to ask whether the specific images associated with the plague occur in all or even most versions. It turns out they don’t. Many versions have no words that sound like sneezes, and many versions don’t mention falling down. For example, [Iona and Peter Opie](#) give an 1883 version (in which “curchey” is dialect for “curtsey”):

“*A ring, a ring o’roses
 A pocket full of posies
 One for Jack and one for Jim and one for little Moses
 A curchey in and a curchey out
 And a curchey all together*”

Moreover, in many versions, everyone gets up again once they have fallen down, which hardly makes sense if falling down represents death.

“Posies,” or bouquets of flowers, are almost universal in the song. However, many versions do not make them portable but install them in in pots or bottles, which doesn’t fit well with the plague interpretation. [William Wells Newell](#), writing in 1883, gave several versions, including:

“*Round the ring of roses
 Pots full of posies
 The one who stoops last
 Shall tell whom she loves best*

and

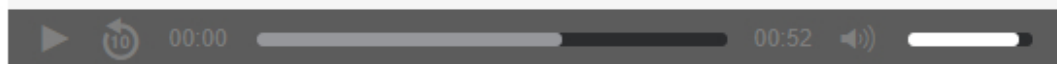
“*Ring around the rosie
 Bottle full of posy
 All the girls in our town
 Ring for little Josie*

On May 16, 1939, in Wiergate, Texas, John and Ruby Lomax collected an interesting version for the Library of Congress, from a group of African American schoolgirls. You can hear it in the player below. The words were as follows:

eggs
 England
 ethnomusicologists
 Exhibits
 Father's Day
 Fieldwork
 Film
 Finnish Americans
 Fiona Ritchie
 Folk Art
 Folk Drama
 Folk Medicine
 Folk Music
 Folklorists
 Folksong
 Foodways
 Frances Densmore
 Francis La Flesche
 freedom struggle
 Freedom Struggle
 Freedom Summer
 1964
 Games
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 George Pickow
 German Americans
 Gerry Parsons
 Glen Percy
 Collection
 Greek Americans
 Haiti
 Halloween
 Hawaiian Americans
 Herbert Halpert
 Hidden Folklorists
 Higher Education
 Hispanic Americans
 Holidays
 Home
 Homegrown Concert
 Series
 Homegrown Plus
 Hunting
 immigration
 Independence Day
 Intangible Cultural
 Heritage
 Internship program
 Iraq War
 ireland
 Irish Americans
 Italian Americans

“ *Ring around a Rosey*
Pocketful o' posies
Light bread, sweet bread, squat!
Guess who she told me, tralalalala
Mr. Red was her lover, tralalalala
If you love him, hug him!
If you hate him, stomp!

Ring Round Rosey
 AFC 1939/001: AFS 02656b01
 Burkeville, Texas, 1939-05-16.



Audio Controls



None of these versions fits the plague interpretation very well, but they do reveal other functions and meanings: the rhyme is often used as a playful courtship game in which children dance in a ring, then suddenly stoop, squat, curtsy (“curchey”), or in some cases fall to the ground. The last to do so (or the one that jumps the gun) has to pay a penalty, which is sometimes to profess love for (or hug or kiss) another child. In some versions, this child then takes up a place in the middle of the ring, representing the “rosie” or rose bush. Newell explicitly states that the game was played like this in America in the 1880s, and European analogs from the same time and later are similar. In many versions, then, the roses and posies signify what flowers often signify in traditional European culture: not suffering and death, but joy and love.

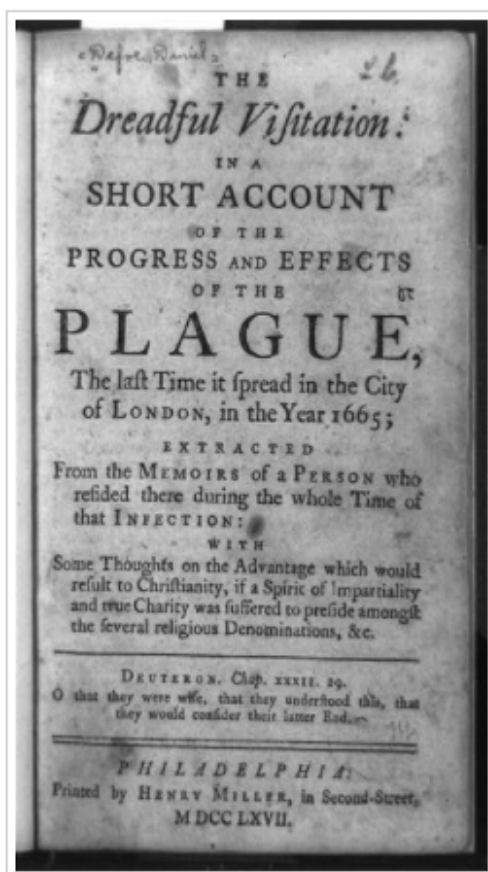


Children playing “Ring Around the Rosie” in Chicago, Illinois, April, 1941. Photo by Edwin Rosskam. Prints and Photographs Division. [//hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8a15771](https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8a15771)

The above observations show that “Ring Around the Rosie” is a “singing-game” or a “play-party song,” both of which are names for children’s dance songs. Plague theorists say it’s still possible that the plague was the original meaning, and that children pressed the rhyme into service for their games and dances. But there are other reasons, too, not to believe the plague story. For example, this rhyme and dance are internationally distributed, and records

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[James Madison](#)
[Carpenter](#)
[japanese americans](#)
[jazz](#)
[Jean Ritchie](#)
[Jewish Americans](#)
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[Juan B Rael](#)
[Juneteenth](#)
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plague story. For example, the rhyme and dance are internationally distributed, and recorded turn up on the European continent before they do in England. The Opies give versions from Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, among other places. Meanwhile, there's no evidence the rhyme existed in English until the late 19th Century. Newell, writing in 1883, asserted that the rhyme was known in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1790, but he gave no evidence, and none has come to light. After this unsubstantiated claim, the rhyme [doesn't turn up in English until 1881](#). What evidence is there it survived undocumented since 1665?



Title page of *The Dreadful Visitation: in a short account of the progress and effects of the plague* by Daniel Defoe. This is one of several contemporary accounts of the plague year, none of which mentions anything resembling "Ring Around the Rosie." Prints and Photographs Division. [//hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b41405](https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b41405)

this rhyme find out about that connection, and why can't we find whatever evidence he or she had?

All this makes scholars skeptical, to say the least. In 2010 [English folklorist and librarian Steve Roud](#) noted that "the Plague origin is complete nonsense," and in the 1980s, the [Opies](#) (who first recorded and debunked the belief in 1951) wrote: "We ourselves have had to listen so often to this interpretation we are reluctant to go out of the house."

Still, the story only seems to have grown stronger in the second half of the twentieth century, and this itself is interesting to folklorists. After all, the story is itself folklore: a tale that was passed on by word of mouth first, then in writing and online media. And because it is also [about](#) folklore, folklorists classify it as "metafolklore": folklore about folklore.

If the plague story is folklore, we would expect to encounter it in different versions and contexts. And

The claim that the rhyme is related to pestilence is even younger; the folklorists who diligently recorded the rhyme itself in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries never mention the plague interpretation, although they surely would have had they known it. The first evidence I've seen that people were connecting the rhyme with death and disaster is from 1949, when the newspaper *The Observer* ran a parody of the rhyme beginning "ring-a-ring-o'-geranium, a pocketful of uranium" and referring to the bombing of Hiroshima. In 1951, we find the first direct reference to the plague interpretation: [Iona and Peter Opie](#) state that some people believe the rhyme refers to the plague, but are not themselves convinced.

Finally, there's simply no direct evidence. Even if the rhyme itself remained unrecorded for two hundred years after the plague, various types of evidence might exist: a description of children playing dancing-games referring to roses and mocking the plague, or oral traditions of the earliest informants making the link. As it turns out, though, neither of these kinds of evidence has turned up, despite [meticulous day-to-day accounts](#) of life in London in 1665, and [accounts of the Plague by people who lived through it](#). So today's scholars want to know: how did the first person who claimed a connection between the events of 1665 and



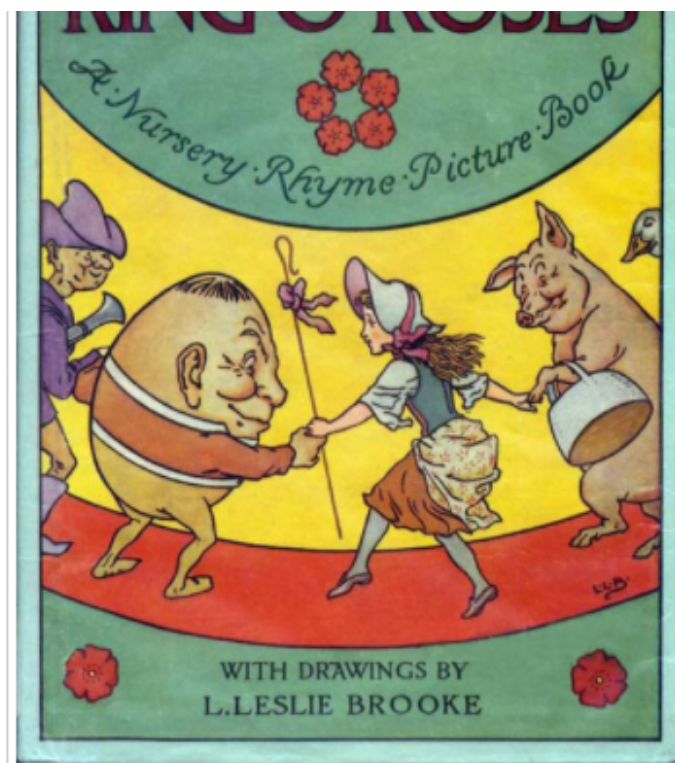
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versions and variants. And so we do. The two main variants are the Londonist's claim that the rhyme refers to the Great Plague of 1665, and others' claims that it stems from the [Black Death of 1347](#). Within these two main variants, there are sub-variants: in particular, FitzGerald and others say the 1665 rhyme originated in London, while [others say it came from Eyam](#), a village in the English Midlands that was also infected with plague in 1665. [One article even claims](#) Eyam children sang it "while dancing around the victims!"

There are also innumerable individual versions of this story, each with its own quirks. Because the plague can infect different parts of the body and cause different symptoms, because people know about or imagine different historical health practices, and because different versions of the rhyme have different specific words, plague stories vary widely in the correspondences they find between words and plague experiences: [for some](#), "a-tishoo" signifies a [sneeze](#), while [for others](#) "ashes" signify [cremation](#). For supporters of pneumonic plague, the ring is a [rosy skin rash](#), while for supporters of the bubonic plague it's a [red inflammation around a black buboe](#). In fact, observing the many different ways in which "Ring Around the Rosie" has been said to conform to real or supposed symptoms, it seems clear that the story did not grow from compelling evidence; rather, evidence has been gathered to support a compelling story.

Metafolkloric stories can be either accurate or inaccurate, but in either case, there's usually a compelling reason we keep telling them, or a deeper truth they express. So one question folklorists like to ask is: "What has been so interesting to people about this story?" That's a hard question to answer, but we can note certain patterns in the kinds of people who tell it. It's very appealing to historians, for whom a glimpse of the distant past in the present is always exciting. It's especially compelling to historians of the plagues themselves; in fact, standard works [about the 1347 plague](#) and [the 1665 plague](#) recount the story as fact. Part of the task of such historians is to explain how the plague has continued to influence our lives, and the chance to mention a rhyme everyone knows and connect it to this deep history is irresistible. Secondly, the story is often told by advocates for particular places. [Travel blogs spread the Eyam story](#), while [Londonist "celebrates London and everything that happens in it."](#) Advocates for [medical education](#) and even for [sanitary sewers](#) have used the song's supposed connection to disease to suggest that their particular expertise remains relevant to anyone who has heard this common rhyme. Finally, there are many people with a love of the macabre, and nothing is more disturbing than the idea of little children playing to a description of pestilence and death.

Our love for the plague story goes deeper than the agendas of a few interest groups, though. [Even professors who know it's not true](#) can't resist telling it! Folklorists know better than anyone the fascination with things that are older than they seem, and with "extraordinary claims of everyday things." Some founders of the discipline of folklore



The cover of Leonard Leslie Brooke's Ring O' Roses shows nursery rhyme characters performing "Ring Around the Rosie." The book was first published in 1922 and the image is therefore in the public domain.

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extraordinary origins of everyday things. Some founders of the discipline of folklore espoused the [theory of survivals](#), which held that cultural materials such as nursery rhymes preserved information from the past that was otherwise forgotten. To adherents of this theory, a shard of pottery, a riddle, or a child's jingle could be the key that unlocked the mythology of the distant past, and the folklorist's task was to interpret or decode the cryptic messages within these fragments. In fact, the irony is that the plague story resembles nothing so much as a nineteenth-century folklorist's interpretation of the rhyme, but today's folklorists often express annoyance with the tale's persistence. Maybe it reminds us too much of ourselves.

In any case, we certainly understand its appeal: in the marketplace of ideas, a good story often outsells mere facts.

Do you know an interesting story about a nursery rhyme that you're curious about? Leave us a comment below!

Resources

Several of the books cited above with links to their Library of Congress catalog records are also available elsewhere as free electronic resources. The Library of Congress can't always vouch for the quality of reproduction, the accuracy of the text, or the beauty of the presentation, but they may be useful to our readers. These items are in the public domain:

Mother Goose or the Old Nursery Rhymes, illustrated by Kate Greenaway

Ring O' Roses, by Leonard Leslie Brooke

A Journal of the Plague Year, by Daniel Defoe

The Diary of Samuel Pepys, 1659-1669, edited by Henry B. Wheatley

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72 Comments

1. *Lisa P.*

July 24, 2014 at 3:32 pm

One that I have sometimes heard is that "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary" is a reference to Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. I have my doubts, but would be interested in knowing more about the idea.

◦ *Stephen Winick*

July 24, 2014 at 3:52 pm

Thanks, Lisa. That idea has been around for a long time, but there are competing interpretations too. One holds that it is a description of Our Lady's convent, which would metaphorically be Mary's garden. The bells are the church bells, the shells were worn as badges by pilgrims, and the maids are the nuns. The story about Mary Queen of Scots suggests that the shells and bells were decorations on her dress, and the pretty maids her ladies-in-waiting, the famous "Four Marys."

As the Ones point out, the connection to Mary Queen of Scots is certainly

As the copies point out, the connection to Mary Queen of Scots is certainly somebody's guess; there is no real evidence for it. But it's not impossible: while the rhyme was not recorded until 1744, there is a dance tune whose title is "Cuckolds all in a Row," which is a line of one 18th-century version of the Mary rhyme. The tune fits the rhyme, and goes back at least to 1651, which suggests the rhyme could be that old. Mary Queen of Scots died in 1587, so there isn't that great a time gap between her life and the first stirrings of evidence of the rhyme.

2. **Patricia A. Atkinson**

July 24, 2014 at 3:56 pm

"nothing is more disturbing than the idea of little children playing to a description of pestilence and death" – Actually, the idea of little children dancing and singing around actual plague victims is more disturbing, at least to me! 😊

I always enjoy reading Stephen's essays on things folkloric. They are well-researched, well-written, and often both amusing and enlightening.

~ Pat

◦ **Stephen Winick**

July 24, 2014 at 4:17 pm

Your point is taken, Pat! And thanks for your kind comment!

3. **Bob Danforth**

July 25, 2014 at 12:00 am

I would be very interested in seeing links to old books go to the scans of the actual old books where copyright or other impediment is not at issue. This seems to be an increasing trend among libraries and museums to maintain such archives. It hugely increases access and at the same time protects and preserves the actual copy, causing far less deterioration as 90% of the needs for any access can be achieved in the digital archive.

I would find it very interesting to correlate (and a page of fixed links could do it) the many political conversations that could not be had openly for fear that you would be killed, but a tune hummed or a nursery rhyme could be equally devastating and no individual could be charged with actual advocacy.

Such a list could provide many fascinating details not normally recorded.

◦ **Stephen Winick**

July 29, 2014 at 1:00 pm

Bob Danforth, thanks for your comment. The Library of Congress doesn't have a large collection of online digital public domain books over which we exercise strict quality control, but we do participate in projects to digitize books, including the Hathi Trust. I've added a resource list with links to online versions of the four public-domain items cited in the text. In three cases I used the Hathi Trust versions, although others are available on the internet. For the Pepys diary, I opted for another site, because the diary is a multivolume work and the relevant entries spread over three of the volumes. For that reason, I selected a simple HTML site presenting the entire text, so readers wouldn't have to search each volume separately.

4. **Paul Cowdell**

July 25, 2014 at 7:55 am

Thanks, this is great. Eyam's accumulating a whole range of plague-related motifs. In the village you can find, for example, a weathervane representing a plague-spreading

rat, even though the village legend traditions don't blame this particular outbreak of plague on rats at all. (The infected fleas are supposed to have arrived in a parcel of cloth delivered to a village tailor).

5. **Abby Sale**

July 25, 2014 at 4:50 pm

Nice article. Thank you.

I heard, and accepted, that the plague explanation was merely a "Just So" story for 50 years but it was always just summarily dismissed. If an explanation was given, it was a statement that there is no evidence to accept that it's true and the burden is on the claimer. Of course, that's true but it's far more satisfying to read the negative evidence and reasoning that does exist.

I feel better now.

6. **B. Ross**

July 26, 2014 at 11:52 am

You know, the way it was explained to me had nothing to do with the traits of the disease itself. Rather, it was about the morality of it all.

"Ring around the Rosie" — refers to counting the Rosary while praying. Both Catholicism and Church of England have this tradition.

"Pocket Full of Posies" — explained to me as stuffing the pockets of the dead with flowers to help ward off stench, but may also be a reference to "Posie rings" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posie_ring)

"Ashes, ashes" — as in "ashes to ashes, dust to dust"

"We all fall down" — self-explanatory in this context.

This is not to say that this interpretation is any less apocryphal than the ones outlined above—and the fact that "ashes, ashes" is an American variant is especially abrogating—but as interpreted above, it is a cohesive thought relative to one aspect of the Plague.

In fact, given the multiple variations and interpretations above, it is unlikely that it was ever written specifically to reference the plague. But who's to say that it wasn't appropriated and repurposed for that? After all, Folklore is replete with examples of cultural appropriation.

◦ **Stephen Winick**

July 28, 2014 at 12:01 pm

B. Ross, thanks for your comment and your unusual version of the Plague story. It's still unlikely that the rhyme was appropriated and repurposed at the time of the plague, simply because there's no evidence it existed then. But it is certainly true that the rhyme was appropriated and repurposed to tell a story about the plague after the fact. Usually the story is a variant of "the Plague affected modern life in unexpected ways." Your version is no exception; in this case, it's the prayers in response to the Plague that became a nursery rhyme rather than a description of its effects. So the emphasis, as you say, is on the moral and spiritual aspects rather than the physical and medical.

7. **Joe Hickerson**

August 5, 2014 at 7:22 pm

Great article! Well done! I seem to recall that during the 1959+ Ban the Bomb movement in England, one poet published two small collections of re-worked nursery rhymes, etc., on the subject. One, as I recall, was "A-ring around a neutron / a-pocket

full of positron / a-tission, a-tission / we all fall down." Kind-a like your 1949 example.

◦ **Stephen Winick**

August 11, 2014 at 11:05 am

Thanks, Joe. By then the idea that "Ring Around the Rosie" was about the Plague was already common in England, which is probably where the idea came from to connect it to other deadly disasters.

8. **Ann Canning**

August 6, 2014 at 8:19 am

I can make a personal note that corroborates the Texas 1939 Lomax version of this song. I spent my childhood in the Piedmont region of North Carolina (Winston-Salem) and distinctly remember in the 1940's on the Elementary School playground singing this song with these words: Ring around the Rosie, Pocketful of posies. Red Bird, Blue Bird, Squat! Rosie was the child in the middle and the last child in the ring to squat became the next Rosie. I don't know why we would have said Red Bird, Blue Bird instead of Light Bread, Sweet Bread as they did in Texas. But I do know that my grandmother and mother did not bake light or yeast breads. They only made quick breads like corn bread and biscuits.

◦ **Stephen Winick**

August 11, 2014 at 11:03 am

Thanks for the interesting North Carolina version and the description of the game, Ann. It's always nice to get new folklore items from our readers!

9. **Dolly Jorgensen**

August 22, 2014 at 2:36 am

Has anyone suggested that the "A-tishoo! A-tishoo!" line might be related to sneezing because of the flowers themselves? Certainly taking a whiff of strong smelling fresh flowers might induce that reaction in many, especially of course if you have allergies.

◦ **Stephen Winick**

August 22, 2014 at 12:57 pm

That's certainly a possibility for those versions that feature sneezing sounds. Thanks for the suggestion!

10. **rishitha**

August 26, 2014 at 4:42 am

I was very intrested in reading the articles on folkloric. That are really good.

11. **Judith Cohen**

October 31, 2014 at 11:14 am

Love that Texas version! Folklore in general, and sometimes children's folklore in particular, is – very often – so refreshingly non-pc...

12. **Ashley horn**

November 5, 2014 at 1:47 pm

I wanna know who created this song or nursery rhyme because I don't want to know it at all.

13. **Black Death**

December 10, 2014 at 3:52 pm

This is refferd to the Black Death,"ashes ashes"-the corpses after the Black Death were all burned so that makes sense,everything else,look for another comment

14. **Renate van den Bosch**

December 22, 2014 at 7:42 am

DECEMBER 22, 2014 at 1:43 am

Hi, this rhyme was also used in a childrens television series, in which a girl living or visiting an old manor house has visions of soldiers marching through the same house in past times. Does anyone know the name of this TV show?? Don't know whether it was British or American, it was broadcast in the seventies, maybe early eighties.

15. *lovetina*

May 21, 2015 at 3:40 pm

i want to know the true meaning,
if the song means something bad or evil

◦ *Stephen Winick*

May 21, 2015 at 3:45 pm

It doesn't seem to mean anything bad or evil. It seems to be a game where the words describe the actions the kids are supposed to do. In some versions, kids kiss other kids, so your reaction might depend on the version and on what you think is proper behavior!

16. *Brigita*

May 24, 2015 at 1:01 pm

"Ring around the rosie": Once I was in London, i've heard the story that when a person was brought to execution and was going warded through the streets to the execution place – people, family members or supporters threw flowers to them and sang the song to them.

◦ *Stephen Winick*

May 26, 2015 at 9:50 am

Thanks, Brigita, for your comment. It's interesting that completely different stories exist connecting the rhyme to earlier historical periods and to death imagery. All such stories are metafolklore, and so far none of them has any good evidence to back it up. As I said in the post, it is possible for metafolkloric stories to also be true, but in these cases no reference to the rhyme at all turns up before 1881, and public executions ceased in England in 1868; after that executions were usually conducted in private within the prison where the prisoner already was kept, so there was no journey to a place of execution. So, while it's not impossible that the rhyme was used that way before 1868, there's no direct evidence, and all the indirect evidence points the other way: the rhyme probably didn't exist when public executions were common in England. In general, most folklorists would call that story a fascinating variant of the general idea that the seemingly simple and innocent nursery rhyme actually has a dark and secret history.

17. *Jessica Rubinstein*

May 24, 2015 at 5:18 pm

With absolutely no evidence, except the unsatisfactoriness of explanations I have found, I have always wondered if "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe" might be an unkind British satire concerning the Catholic Church, with the shoe a reference to the shape of Italy. The specifics about the whipping, the broth, etc. would depend on the political moment in which the rhyme originated, the inquisition being a possible reference. Has anyone ever looked into the possibility?

◦ *Stephen Winick*

May 26, 2015 at 10:49 am

Thanks, Jessica. I have seen that interpretation, but I do not know its origin. The version I saw did not mention the inquisition, just the generally impoverished conditions of many Catholics in the south of Italy, which does suggest certain historical periods over others. This reading turns up in various

dark corners of the web, [such as this one](#). A more general interpretation notes that shoes are an old fertility symbol, showing up in such contexts as Cinderella's glass slipper and the old custom of throwing shoes at the bride and groom at a wedding (which survives today in the form of tying old shoes to the rear bumper of their car). Alan Dundes discusses this in his essay "Projection in Folklore," available in the book [Interpreting Folklore](#). His idea seems to be that the old woman "living in a shoe" suggests an over-emphasis on sexuality, which leads to having too many children, but he is not explicit on this point. As he so often does, he flits from folklore item to folklore item, discussing at greater length another rhyme:

Cock-a-doodle-doo
My dame has lost her shoe
My master's lost his fiddling-stick
They don't know what to do

This rhyme can also be found in the [classic collections](#) by Iona and Peter Opie. As Dundes points out, the fact that a wife loses her "shoe" and a husband his "stick," leading to them "not knowing what to do" is certainly suggestive that these are sexual metaphors. However, as with much humorously sexual folklore, there is also an innocent explanation: they were planning to go to a dance, where he would have contributed to the music and she to the dancing. With only one shoe and one fiddlestick, they won't be able to perform their roles!

18. *Pat O' Mahony*

June 17, 2015 at 4:35 pm

Hi

I am Irish, and was born in Ireland in 1956 and remember when I was very young that our elders explained,

'ring- a- ring- a- rosie ,
a pocket full of posie,
atishoo, atushoo,
we all fall down

as being a London city children's game.

'ring -a -ring -a rosy'
they explained as tuberculosis (TB) the pale round rose color on the patient's cheeks
' a pocket full of posies '
they explained that doctors attending this patient carried pockets of lavender herb which they used as a disinfectant to protect themselves from contracting the disease. They would regularly remove a bunch of lavender from their pockets and crush and wash their hands and face with it.
'a-tishoo a-tishoo'
they explained as being on death's door
'we all fall down'
they explained as death in very large numbers or an epidemic.

This version continues to be retold and is most popular here in Ireland.

◦ *Stephen Winick*

June 17, 2015 at 4:41 pm

Thanks for those details, Pat. It's very interesting that in Irish versions of the legend from the 1950s and 1960s, the disease had become tuberculosis. It shows that while the legend can serve to associate the rhyme with the Middle

shows that, while the legend can serve to associate the rhyme with the Middle Ages, other versions can be more up to date while preserving the same basic story!

19. **bill**

June 27, 2015 at 11:31 pm

"It is what it is" !!

◦ **Stephen Winick**

June 30, 2015 at 10:28 am

Thanks, Bill! I assume you are suggesting that "Ring Around the Rosie" doesn't require the plague explanation; it simply is what it appears to be at first glance: a cute kids' game. This is a good point, and it's interesting that you used metafolklore to express it.

How is it metafolklore? Most folklorists would characterize "it is what it is" as a proverb. "It is what it is" is a certain kind of proverb, a formulaic, seemingly tautological statement. Other examples of this kind of proverb include "business is business," "a promise is a promise," or, as Robert Burns observed, "a man's a man." All of these proverbs seem to be merely statements of the obvious. But proverbs have the interesting characteristic that most of them don't mean merely what they say; most have a figurative meaning. The figurative meaning of these proverbs saves them from tautology. That figurative meaning is some version of "one example of x should be treated as another example of x." Business is business, so don't expect a special discount because you're friends with the store owner. A promise is a promise, so don't think you can get out of yours. A man's a man, so don't treat rich people better than poor people.

"It is what it is" works in much the same way. "The deadline has been moved up a week. It is what it is, so don't try to change it." It's a type of folklore that's been around a long time, even though the specific phrase "it is what it is" has become popular only recently. In this case, too, the phrase is not only folklore but also metafolklore, because the "it" in the proverb refers to "Ring Around the Rosie," another item of folklore. Thus, you have generated a metafolkloric response to an article about metafolklore. Well done!

20. **Deb in Denver**

July 30, 2015 at 1:12 pm

I stumbled here by accident – isn't the 'net a wonderful invention? One thing I've wondered about in regard to this rhyme: while all humans presumably make the same sound while sneezing & have for eons, is it a coincidence that the ppl who make facial "tissue" named their product after the sound made in the third line of the RAtR chant? I think the Americanized "atchoo" sounds more like a sneeze, but the alleged orig. "atishoo" could be heard the same way. But going one step further, is it possible that "a tishoo" is simply a mnemonic for "a tissue"? I'd suggest that may be the case, esp. after reading in your exc. article that it wasn't until after WWII that the theories sprang up connecting RAtR with the black death/plague. Oh, we knew a bit about germs, but it wasn't until that war we pushed hard to garner yet more info to help in the fight to keep humans alive longer. So disposal tissues helped go a distance down that road. Throwing away germy, diseased paper made more sense than coming in intimate contact with said disease by hand-washing reusable cloth. (I too have read about plague coming to England's midlands by a shipment of cloth to a tailor.) It might have been a serendipitous way in the 40s to neatly wrap up loose ends, as it were. Yeah, I know – I'm probably full of it, but I do so enjoy pondering odd things 😊

21. **Larry**

September 18, 2015 at 3:04 pm

I have always considered the rhyme to be about the plague, but being from England I may think that.

The first line is into reference of the symptoms either the rash or boil type thing.

The second is in reference to the "quacks" or doctors with the big masks with a beak looking thing on them which they would stuff with lavender and that kinda stuff because the smells weren't all that.

The 3rd, just another symptom, you get ill and sneeze.

Lastly we all fall down, lots and lots of people died.

Only to be stopped or helped come to an end by the great fire of London, which has another rhyme to it.

Humpty dumpty is also about a cannon that fell during the civil war(the British one) and that was a cannon that was in Colchester

22. **Caroline Daniels**

September 29, 2015 at 9:32 pm

Can you tell me what the Jack and Jill ryme means. You know, Jack and Jill went up the hill to get a bucket of water. That would be nice to know what that means.

23. **Kat**

December 25, 2015 at 9:37 pm

I have never heard of any of your versions. I am 61 yrs old and the version I grew up with was: Ring around the Rosie, pocket full of posies, Ashes, ashes , all fall down. More sinister than any of yours. I also asked friends and family and they also only know of my version

◦ **Stephen Winick**

December 28, 2015 at 10:07 am

Thanks for your comment, Kat. As I pointed out, the "sinister" interpretation of the rhyme emerged in the 1950s, exactly the era when you were born and your version seemed to be standard. So it's not a coincidence that your version (or one close to it) is the one discussed in the plague interpretation: the whole point was to use the most popular version of the rhyme to make it seem sinister. But if the plague interpretation were true, we'd expect it to apply most closely to the oldest versions, not the version that became standardized through print in the 20th century.

24. **Melissa**

January 30, 2016 at 10:48 am

I grew up in the late 60s and early 70s and I don't remember ever actually playing these games, not "Rosie," not Snap the Whip or Red rover. We had Hide 'n Seek, of course.

I lived in a neighborhood without that many kids in it, maybe with the burgeoning of suburbia we lost some of these traditions.

25. **Linda**

June 2, 2016 at 10:24 pm

I am age 73. Here is the Ring Around the Rosie rhyme kids in my area sang.

Ring around the rosie
Pocket full of posies
E spur I spur
Squat

I was shocked when I had children to hear and see in writing "ashes, ashes, all fall down." I laid this to its having been passed down orally through generations of children whose ancestors came from England. But I could not let go the thought that our verse

must have at one time made sense. I had heard that rosie was the boil and posies in the pocket were to help the odor of the diarrhea that accompanied the plague. But what was a "spur and an "e". Here is how I made sense of the version that we sang, considering that nobody saw it in writing and it was handed down by children.

Ring around the rosie
Pocket full of posies
Ye purge, I purge
Squat.

I think this makes sense in context of the plague time and it is logical that at some point "ye" would have morphed to "e" "purge" to "spur". I hope my version will be in the blog and that I will hear the thoughts of others on the matter.

26. **Emily**

November 27, 2016 at 12:19 am

Hi I never knew that this was about any kind of plague I just knew it as a cute kids game but this is rather interesting thanks for this.

27. **Rebecca Landers**

December 21, 2016 at 2:26 pm

My mother (who was born in 1913 on a dairy farm near Atlanta, and whose mom was from rural N. GA) taught it to me as

Ring around a rosy
Pocket full of posy
Upstairs, downstairs,
In my lady's chamber
(Repeat, and change the last line to "Giddy, giddy, squat!")

28. **Penny Wiora**

February 15, 2017 at 8:12 pm

I heard it as ashes ashes we all fall down and played it that way growing up. I am now 74. My son told me when he was in his 30s that it meant that the German Children who lived near the prison camps would play it this way because the ashes in the air from the crematoriums would rain ashes in the air from the dead. I guess anything can be applied if you think about.

29. **Penny Wiora**

February 15, 2017 at 8:13 pm

No freedom of speech here I guess.

30. **NW**

April 20, 2017 at 9:32 am

This is the version that I learned as a child.

Ring around the rosie
Pocket full of posies
Upstairs, downstairs
We all fall down

As I understand the interpretation, this was written in England in the 19th century. It was during a time of economic downfall for the wealthy in England. In their castles, the owners would be in the living quarters upstairs; and, the servants would be in the downstairs basement area with the kitchen and their living quarters. When the economic downfall happened, both the rich and their servants were affected. Therefore, they all fell down. Hence, "We all fall down" in the nursery rhyme.

31. **mark**

April 21, 2017 at 7:58 pm

So it is not about the plague because of 'telephone game theory' – yeah, sounds great. Keep believing what you want.

◦ **Stephen Winick**

April 24, 2017 at 10:11 am

Thanks for your comment, Mark. My argument is that it is (almost certainly) not about the plague, because there is no evidence that it is, and never was any evidence. I'm not sure what you mean by "telephone game theory," which is not mentioned in the post. But if you have some evidence, I'd love to see it.

32. **J. L. Bell**

July 27, 2017 at 2:56 pm

A version of the verse was published in 1855 in *The Old Homestead* by Ann S. Stephens of Connecticut:

A ring—a ring of roses,
Laps full of posies;
Awake—awake!
Now come and make
A ring—a ring of roses.

Later in the same chapter Stephens referred to "ring, ring a rosy" as a children's game.

Here's [a link](#) to more discussion.

33. **Lisa Yannucci**

November 18, 2017 at 7:14 pm

Regarding "...nothing is more disturbing than the idea of little children playing to a description of pestilence and death..."

When I was little and the children in my neighborhood found a dead animal, we would bury it in a nearby field and go in a large ring around it (there were many of us). We would go around in a circle and sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot". Have you ever heard of this as a tradition?

34. **Kristen Murray**

November 20, 2017 at 10:53 am

Here is a weird little side note. I am married to a British man from South Shields near Newcastle upon Tyne.

As an American, when I sneeze I either "say" achoo or I make a weird loud sneezy noise.

But when my husband sneezes, he literally says "A-tishoo" (like "a tissue").

We've had a long running (30 year) "discussion" over which is "normal". He swears that this is how the British sneeze. I, of course, call it unnatural and tell him that "achoo" being a sound rather than spoken words.

Interestingly, when we sing the Ring Around The Rosie song, I sing "Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down." But he sings "A-tishoo!, A-tishoo!, we all fall down."

FWIW, I was born and raised in New England and my ancestors were all part of The

35. **Hey There**

January 5, 2018 at 1:39 pm

I want a million dollars and I think that song is cool

36. **Johnathan**

January 5, 2018 at 2:36 pm

This is just disappointing and makes me feel a little more demonic when singing this song to my future children

37. **evan**

January 5, 2018 at 2:52 pm

very good article

38. **evan**

January 5, 2018 at 2:53 pm

amazing article!!!!!!!!!!!!

39. **John**

February 15, 2018 at 9:42 pm

The children in the recording seem to be singing "roses" and "poses", no?

◦ **Stephen Winick**

February 20, 2018 at 10:21 am

Thanks, John. If I were to transcribe it purely phonetically, it might be close to "rosa" and "poses," that is, with a schwa in place of the long e in "rosie" and "posies." But I think we're just hearing their pronunciation of "rosie" and "posies," coupled with the indistinct sound on the old disc recording. Lomax certainly thought they were singing "Rosey," as that was in the title he gave it, and he heard it in person. And it's unclear to me what a "pocketful o' poses" would be, if it's not just their way of pronouncing "posies."

40. **David**

March 22, 2018 at 1:11 am

An interesting post, which seems to sum up the standard view on the matter pretty well. But I think that you're being overly literal with the plague myth, and in doing so are missing the point of why so many find it compelling.

Rather than ask if RATR was consciously created as a commemoration of a specific event in English history, I think it's more interesting to ask whether certain versions of the game/song have been influenced by episodes of mass horror and despair. Folk art has no specific author. Instead, it evolves continuously. There's no point in trying to find the "original, authentic" version of RATR. There is none. The existence of older non-apocalyptic versions doesn't negate the later versions. Curtseying to the May Queen can very easily be transformed into falling dead. Children are quite creative in this regard.

And I think it's pretty clear that RATR is a game about death. Go watch some kids play it, or think back on your own childhood. Everyone knows that the falling down represents dying, and the boys in particular will really ham it up. It's not scary dying. It's play dying, with laughing and giggling. (What's particularly interesting about RATR, is that the object of the game is to all die at precisely the same time).

And many versions of the song also quite clearly convey the same idea. Take the standard English version with the sneezing. Everyone associates sneezing with being

sick. It doesn't take too much imagination to hear "sneeze, sneeze, we all fall down" and think of an epidemic of some sort that is wiping out the town. The American version with the "ashes, ashes" line conveys a melancholic despair. The wild differences in specific subject matter (illness vs fire), actually underline their commonality: mass calamity.

I grew up in Italy, and they have a version of RATR there too. The game itself is identical, but the song is totally different, although it's sung to the same tune. But the song is still apocalyptic, seemingly dealing with earthquakes, which are quite common in Italy. So whoever "translated" the song into Italian picked up the important part, namely large scale destruction.

I think it's natural to then look at the details of the song and try to find some clue that might tie it to some specific event. Of course these are going to be inconsistent with each other. It's various people saying maybe it's this, or perhaps that. (The version I originally heard, which I've never seen anywhere else, was that the "rosy" was the bonfire that was producing the ashes). None of these speculations can be proved or disproved, there's just no information to go on. And they're also unlikely to be accurate. Folk traditions provide us with a wonderful window into the past, but it's generally not a literal one. Rather, it's figurative and emotional.

Rather than doing a binary debunking of this myth, I think it would be better to say that there's no specific evidence that ties RATR to any particular event. But yes, it seems quite plausible that many of the popular versions today do obliquely reflect tragedies of some sort. And the various plagues that devastated Europe may have figured in this, but we don't really know one way or the other.

◦ **Stephen Winick**
April 5, 2018 at 1:14 pm
Hi David,

Thanks for your thoughtful comment. I don't really disagree with most of what you said. I was just pointing out that there is nothing tying it to the plague, either in the fourteenth or seventeenth centuries. I think this goes beyond "we don't really know one way or the other," however, given that there is no evidence of the game at all for hundreds of years after those plagues. We could just as well say it refers to Vikings burning a village, or the building of Stonehenge (back then, maybe pink flowers grew on Salisbury Plain), or to any other event that catches our fancy. We shouldn't just say that "we don't really know one way or the other" if they are true. That's equally true of any story anyone makes up.

I also don't think it's very clear that the game is traditionally "about death." It certainly may be now that this interpretation has reached children. But the first evidence of this interpretation is from adults, not kids. Still, it's certainly true, as you're suggesting, that modern versions of it are being performed by kids who are aware of the plague interpretation. However, it's also notable that the obvious context of many traditional versions—kissing games and mock courtship—is almost never mentioned in popular interpretations, just the plague story.

Finally, I wasn't saying there's no compelling reason for people to look for such details in the song. In fact I highlighted some of those reasons in the post. The entire process of creating metafolklore springs from our need to explain such details. As I suggested in the post, "folklorists know better than anyone the fascination with things that are older than they seem, and with 'extraordinary origins of everyday things.'"

41. **Randy**

September 12, 2018 at 1:10 pm

Our version of ring around the roses in the mountains of NC (1950 /60's) – 3rd/4th verses – “red bird,blue bird stoop”

42. **Elizabeth**

December 2, 2018 at 2:48 pm

When I was a student at BYU I did a project on South Indian folklore. I can't remember the publication but I came across a Tamil folktale that bore a striking resemblance to the folktale from the South Eastern United States, Old Dry Fry. In the South Indian tale, forgive me because it's been some time since I read it last, a man is killed and villagers pass him around to avoid their responsibility for his accidental death. The similarities between two folk tales in two different areas of the world facinated me; I always wondered how the tale traveled across the world.

43. **Melissa Carrico**

May 25, 2019 at 3:01 pm

I believe that ring around the rosary (a rosary of 5 decades of Hail Marys and Our Fathers), pocket full of posey (flowers) atishoo (Holy Spirit) atishoo (Holy Spirit) we all fall down (in reverence) is the meaning that makes the most sense. England according to Anne Vail was incredibly dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The English rose came from dedication to Mary. Knights went to battle with a rose on their armpit to indicate they were fighting for Mary. “In Germany they sing “ringel, ringel, rosen crantz” ring a ring a rosary. pg 47 The story of the Rosary. This makes so much sense. Families in the midst of their grief would not have encouraged this darker interpretation of this rhyme. They would have encouraged children growing to love the rosary. It is hard to conceptualize in today's culture how much in England's early history existed such a powerful and sting devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Eaton was founded in honor of Our Lady by Henry II. Shrines to Our Lady were numerous and largely destroyed in latter centuries. As Anne Vail states, “In the early centuries, prayer was held to be a physical as well as a mental exercise. The early Syrian hermits repeatedly threw themselves to the ground during their prayer. Saint Louis, King of France knelt down every day fifty times while saying “Ave Maria. The Irish monks of Saint Patrick prayed with arms outstretched and the original recitation of Our Lady's Psalter entailed fifty Aves, each accompanied by a genuflection.

◦ **Stephen Winick**

May 28, 2019 at 10:55 am

Thanks Melissa. It's not impossible, but there are four weaknesses to this theory.

- (1) There is no evidence this rhyme existed before the 19th century, but the theory relies on references to practices in “early history” and “early centuries.”
- (2) The rhyme is rarely if ever collected in English with the word “rosary.” (“Rosenkranz” does mean “rosary” in German, but originally means “rose wreath,” so there's no proof the German version is religious.)
- (3) “Atishoo” has nothing obvious to do with the Holy Spirit
- (4) “Falling down” in reverence is farfetched if one's only evidence comes from “early Syrian hermits.” We would ideally want evidence from 19th century England.

44. **me**

October 7, 2019 at 9:25 pm

in the early 1300s josie was the first recorded name to be dead from the illness. I also do belive that this song was also sung in the 1300s in the song you will hear “ring around the poise bottle full of posie all the girls in our town ring for little josie.also she

was one of the youngest. now can you give me a reason that this is not true.it so prove it to me.

45. **d**

January 1, 2020 at 8:26 am

WE sang it in toddle groups (just outside London)

Extra verses

Fishes in the water
Fishes in the sea
We all jump up
with a one two three.

Heard or read this connected to idea of clean water / safe to eat food?

46. **Sara**

April 18, 2020 at 4:19 pm

Mr. Stephen Winick:

I read the original article with keen interest and continued on reading the comments. This will sound strange, but as a lover of words and language I find your writing enthralling. Your explanations, word usage, etc. are such a pleasure to read.

Best regards.

47. **L**

April 29, 2020 at 2:56 pm

I was raised in the Deep South by people of Scots-Irish and German ancestry. We were taught this song as Ring around the rosie
Pockets full of posies
Upstairs, downstairs
Guinea, guinea
SQUAT!

All the kids would sit down and the last one went into the circle.
There were 2 versions:one that never ended and one that had a winner. In the first person into the circle would be replaced by the loser of the next round so there was always an equal amount of kids playing. The second involved keeping all losers in the circle until there was only one-the winner. The guinea part? We had guineas (a chicken sort of bird that eats fleas and ticks from the yard) or it could be about money. My Germans were the many Palatines who were swindled out of their savings and abandoned in London on their way to America. Maybe they incorporated it into their version. It was 1760. Who knew?

48. **Brooke**

May 16, 2020 at 12:20 pm

this kinda dark tho

49. **Lisa S H**

May 17, 2020 at 3:44 pm

I performed in a play titled "Games Children Play" in the early 70s at Ohio University. THE GRAD SCHOOL playwright implied that many children's poems and fairy tales had sexual themes. He added music to

"Hickety Pickety, my Black Hen,
She Laid eggs for gentlemen,
Gentlemen come every day,
To see what eggs my hen death lay."

to see what eggs my hen doesn't lay.

And the actresses did a bump and grind in the production.

I had never heard that rhyme before, now I wonder if Miller (the playwright) made it up Or changed the words? ANYONE KNOW?

◦ **Stephen Winick**

May 17, 2020 at 11:28 pm

Dear Lisa,

He didn't make it up. That's a real nursery rhyme. The words vary from version to to version but your playwright didn't do anything to increase the sexual imagery, so I imagine it's a version he found in a book. Find one version in "The Little Mother Goose" at this link [↗](#).

50. **Big Shoe**

July 31, 2020 at 11:26 am

What about this? <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/ring-around-rosie/> [↗](#)

◦ **Stephen Winick**

August 3, 2020 at 11:28 am

Thanks, Big Shoe. As you can see, Snopes agrees with me and uses more or less the same reasoning and many of the same sources. This is not surprising, since folklorists have been saying it since the 1950s. The creators of Snopes are not trained folklorists, but they have worked with and consulted folklorists since the site was created.

51. **Music is Life**

August 20, 2020 at 4:43 am

There are so many different versions of this rhyme that, for all we know, this rhyme/game could've been made on the spot by a group of children's parents. Maybe they needed kids out of the way so they can talk about, I don't know, how are they going ration food this winter or something. And means completely nothing. But, we'll never know.

52. **Jb**

October 25, 2020 at 10:24 pm

Can't taste our snacks
Have to wear our masks
Achoo! Achoo!
We all fall down....

53. **Christin Downing**

October 26, 2020 at 10:35 am

The version I know and grew up singing goes like this:
Ring-around-the-rosies,
Pockets full of posies,
Ashes, ashes,
Well all fall down!

Yeah, pretty creepy, right? To me it's basically screaming: DEATH

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